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Overriding Ambulance fee referendum would break trust with voters

Less than 18 months ago, Montgomery County voters went to the polls and rejected ambulance fees by more than 20,000 votes.

After the election, County Executive Isiah Leggett, who had proposed and pushed hard for the fee law, said he would respect the voters' decision. Nevertheless, two weeks ago, Leggett sent legislation to the County Council to establish ambulance fees of \$300 to \$800.

Leggett's disregard for the decision of voters is disturbing. So are the means he has used to try to impose his will on voters regarding ambulance fees.

In 2010, after volunteer fire and rescue personnel submitted more than 50,000 signatures of county voters requesting a referendum on ambulance fees, Leggett went to court to try to keep the measure off the ballot.

When that failed, Leggett said that firefighters might be laid off if voters rejected ambulance fees. (None were.)

He plastered county government buildings with political banners urging a vote for ambulance fees. He sent on-duty firefighters, whose salaries are paid by the public, to campaign for the measure at community events and on Election Day at the polls. He refused to disclose the value of that huge "in-kind" contribution.

In its April 18 editorial supporting Leggett's renewed push for ambulance fees ["A responsible decision"], The Gazette criticized my description of his actions as "arrogant" and "an end-run around the voters."

However, the editorial failed to mention the action of Leggett's to which I was referring: Very near the end of the General Assembly session earlier this month, without informing the public or County Council, Leggett tried to persuade our county delegation in Annapolis to change state law to enable the county to take away the right of voters to ever vote again on ambulance fees. Our delegation deserves credit for rejecting Leggett's proposal.

Leggett is again claiming fiscal doom and gloom if the council respects the will of voters and rejects ambulance fees. This is ludicrous; revenues from ambulance fees would equal only three-tenths of one percent of county-funded budgets.

Leggett's proposed spending increase of \$199 million for FY13, an increase of about 5 percent, illustrates that county revenues are in better shape now than when voters repealed ambulance fees. The county does not need to resort to ambulance fees to responsibly balance the budget. Nor should it.

During the 2010 referendum campaign, I spoke with thousands of voters. Most agreed that public safety services, such as emergency medical transport, should

continue to be paid with tax dollars, and that no one should be charged an ambulance fee.

Many agreed that ambulance fees of \$300 to \$800 would deter some people from calling 911; and most agreed that insurance companies would raise rates to protect their profits if the county billed them for ambulance transport.

Voters had plenty of access to information before they voted on ambulance fees. The referendum was well-covered in the media and voters received mailings from both sides.

If the County Council overrides the 2010 referendum, it would take years to restore voters' trust in county government.

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